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ABSTRACT

This paper presents results of a study that investigated the role of perceptions of normative behavior concerning academic cheating on self-reported cheating behaviors. A survey was distributed to 250 undergraduates (87 responses) in which demographic information was obtained and the students (nearly all aged 18-22 years) were asked about their knowledge of other people's participation in 15 specific behaviors; to report how often he or she personally participated in the same 15 behaviors; and to rate how dishonest each of the 15 behaviors was, on a bipolar scale. Among the findings were the following: (1) cheating is widespread on college campuses; (2) the participating students reported high incidence of cheating for others (99%) as well as for themselves (81%); (3) the student's own cheating was viewed as not at all unusual--it was seen as a reflection of situational forces; and (4) the students also believed that others benefited more from cheating than they themselves did. Finally, the students also blamed their parents and teachers for widespread cheating because of pressure being placed on them to do well. The study showed that if cheating is widespread, it is in part due to its acceptance among college undergraduates. Contains 32 references. (GLR)

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Everybody (Else) Does It:
Academic Cheating

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Presented at the Eastern Psychological Association Convention,

April, 1992, Boston, MA

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Academic cheating appears to be epidemic on college campuses. The Chronicle of Higher Education recently reported that 37% of surveyed college freshmen said they had cheated on a test in high school, and 57% admitted to copying another student's work (American Council on Education, cited in Collison, 1990a). Another recent study reported that one third of college students cheated in at least eight of their courses in college, while nearly half admitted to cheating in one or two courses (Moffatt, cited in Collison, 1990b). Earlier research seems to indicate that between 40% and 90% of all college students in the U.S. have cheated at some point during their college education (Jendrek, 1989). Our laboratory research demonstrated that in order to avoid unfavorable outcomes (e.g., a poor grade or personal information being disclosed to an authority figure) most students opted to use deceptive tactics over honest ones (Greene & Saxe, 1991). Cheating is so widespread and so acceptable that there is now a book written by a journalism major at Rutgers University available to undergraduates entitled Cheating 101: The Benefits and Fundamentals of Earning the Easy "A" (Gower, 1992).

Thus, it appears from both surveys and other forms of research that dishonesty is a ubiquitous feature of undergraduate college life. It is also the cast that not only do students cheat in school, but despite our parents' attempts to indoctrinate us against telling lies, deception has become an acceptable way for people to interact with each other in many aspects of life. We lie to our parents when they ask us why we were out so late, to our teachers when we tell them the dog ate our homework, and to our dates when we compliment them on their new outfits we do not like. We cheat on exams, steal office supplies from work, and use deceptive tactics to convince customers to buy useless items. There is certainly no shortage of examples of dishonesty in everyday life. The questions that need to be asked, however, are not what kind of lies do people tell and to whom, but considering that we are taught and we teach others that lying is wrong, why do people choose to lie? What circumstances are conducive to deceptive behavior? What are the

motivating factors behind individual's decisions to be dishonest? This study attempted to collect data that describe some of the variables that contribute to dishonesty and to explain how people are able to justify this behavior despite our assumption that they believe it is wrong to be dishonest.

In psychology, a growing literature has evolved on the issue of deception (see, e.g., DePaulo & Rosenthal, 1979; Bond, Kahler, & Paolicelli, 1985; DePaulo, Stone, & Lassiter, 1985). Many of these researchers have focused their efforts on finding the clues targets (those who are lied to) use to detect when senders (those who are lying) are being dishonest, and what behaviors senders display when they lie (see, e.g., Ekman & Friesen, 1974; DePaulo, Lanier, & Davis, 1983; Stiff, Miller, Sleight, Mongeau, Garlick, & Rogan, 1989). The typical paradigm used in such research involves subjects watching videotapes of people lying about some things and telling the truth about others. They are then are asked to make judgments about who is being truthful and who is not.

Ekman and Friesen (1974) found that senders could successfully disguise their faces when they were lying to appear as if they were telling the truth. Bond et al. (1985), found that targets tend to focus on facial behavior. Thus, senders who maintain eye contact and serious looks on their faces are often successful liars. Stiff et al. (1989) found that the less familiar the situation, the more targets depend on nonverbal cues to make judgments of veracity, while those targets in familiar situations were almost uninfluenced by nonverbal cues.

Other techniques people use to deceive successfully are: hamming or exaggerating (DePaulo and Rosenthal, 1979); maintaining a positive demeanor; displaying "normal" conversation behaviors such as smiling, nodding in agreement, and not interrupting (Buller & Aune, 1987); playing up to the known attitudes and preferences of their targets (DePaulo, Stone, & Lassiter, 1985); and effectively taking the perspective of the target (Hyman, 1989). The necessity for this last strategy suggests a reason that young children

may be unsuccessful deceivers as they can not fully appreciate how the situation appears to their target (Hyman, 1989).

In addition, research has been conducted on techniques for combating theft and deception in both the workplace and in college classrooms (see, e.g., Mueller, 1953; Heisler, 1974; Hollinger & Clark, 1983; Baumer & Rosenbaum, 1984). Much of this research has focused on attempting to catch people in lies in order to deter others from being deceptive. Before we can attempt to prevent people from acting dishonestly, however, it is important to understand why it is that they choose this sort of behavior. If we understand the environmental factors that motivate deception, we can then try to create situations that are conducive to honesty which might make methods for deception detection unnecessary.

A number of scholars have attempted to explain why people behave deceptively. Ford, King, and Hollender (1988) have proposed a number of possible reasons that people lie. They suggest that one developmental explanation for lying is that it may be the way children attempt to differentiate themselves from their parents and establish an individual identity. If this is the case, lying probably begins when children learn that their parents cannot control their thoughts.

According to Ford et al. (1988), power is another reason for deception. Having information, maintaining its secrecy, and leaking misinformation can be extremely powerful tools in all sorts of relationships from business dealings to international relations. Bok (1978) notes, however, that once a person is suspected of lying, he/she may lose that power.

Lying also serves the purpose of self-deception (Ford et al., 1988). It can facilitate repression and denial, and can help regulate self-esteem. In fact, it is possible that by telling a lie enough times, the liar may begin to truly believe its veracity.

One study (Miller & Tesser, 1988), suggests that lying is a response to a violation

of the expectations of the target. Students were asked about their attitudes towards particular behaviors, and the attitudes they believed their parents and employers had towards those same behaviors. They then asked students how likely they would be to lie to their parents or employers had they engaged in these behaviors. Miller & Tesser found that the occurrence of deception depended on the target's expectations, not the senders. In other words, lying was produced when the subjects felt that their targets would disapprove of their behavior, regardless of whether or not the subjects believed the behavior was wrong. The motivation to lie was to save face with the target.

In their discussion of white-collar crime, Hirschi and Gottfredson (1987) define crime as a "force or fraud...used to satisfy self-interest, where self-interest refers to the enhancement of pleasure and the avoidance of pain". Thus, they claim that people are dishonest in the workplace because it is a fast and certain way to attain goals with minimal effort. This may also be a reason students cheat in college courses. If they believe, for example, that using crib sheets on an exam is easier than studying and that they will receive high grades with the crib sheets, they may be likely to do so.

A possible reason for employee theft according to Sieh (1987) is that it is a response to perceived inequity. Unfairness has also been shown to result in dishonesty in academic settings. In a survey at a midwestern college, unfairness was suggested by a student as a factor that encouraged cheating (Mueller, 1953). Other situational factors students claimed encouraged cheating included: exam solely or largely determined grade (high stakes); instructor had superior attitude; lack of good rapport between professor and students (adversarial and impersonal environment); poor teaching; and objective tests (one word answers or multiple choice). One student surveyed was quoted as saying that "everybody cheats on this campus; nobody seems to care, and nobody seems to expect honesty" (Mueller, 1953).

Some psychological research suggests that there might be a curvilinear relationship

between cheating and anticipated success (Houston, 1978). Subjects who are certain that they will fail, regardless of what they might do to improve their grades, do not cheat because they do not believe it is a viable means for attaining success. Those who are sure they will succeed do not cheat because they do not need to. Subjects who anticipate possible but not sure success are most likely to cheat because they feel it can help them out of their unsure situation. They might not cheat, however, when the risk of being detected is high (Houston, 1977).

Competition also appears to motivate academic cheating, especially when the student is doing poorly (Cooper & Peterson, 1980). For certain people (those who score high in Machiavellianism), competition with another person is likely to produce dishonesty, while for others (low Machs), personal competition produces more cheating.

These theories, although somewhat helpful, do not adequately explain the prevalence of dishonesty and the ease with which people seem to lie and cheat. Perhaps people ignore the advice given to them by parents and teachers and instead gauge their behavior by the actions of others. If individuals believe that everyone (or at least most others) lie, they may be more likely to lie themselves and might more easily find ways to justify their behavior.

The goal of the present study was to investigate the role of perceptions of normative behavior concerning academic cheating on self-reported cheating behaviors. If subjects think cheating is normative, that "everyone does it", they should be more likely to report participation in deceptive behavior, to think that cheating is less dishonest, and to find ways to justify their actions. The hypotheses, thus, were that high levels of self-reported cheating would be associated with reports of high levels of cheating on the part of others, and that those specific behaviors subjects admitted to, would be classified as less dishonest and more justifiable than those behaviors they claimed they did not take part in. Thus, subjects would admit to participating in those behaviors that are considered

normative and would not deem them dishonest or unjustified. It was also predicted that subjects would report significantly more cheating on the part of their classmates than for themselves. In addition, we predicted that subjects would claim that others benefitted more from cheating than they themselves did. They would believe that they could do equally well without cheating, but that others needed to cheat in order to get meritorious grades.

In order to demonstrate this phenomenon, we distributed a survey called the "Academic Practices Questionnaire" to undergraduates at a small, private university that asked students to report the occurrence frequency of a number of cheating behaviors. The particular behaviors were selected on the basis of the outcome of a four person focus group. The purpose of a focus group is to "bring together several participants to discuss a topic of mutual interest to themselves and the researcher" (Morgan & Spanish, 1984). The group consisted of four undergraduates (two seniors and two juniors) who discussed the amount and types of cheating that occur on campus. Using these discussions, fifteen behaviors were chosen for the survey.

Method

Subjects: Subjects were 250 undergraduates who left their mailboxes open for the summer session (they were either enrolled in summer courses, or were living locally). Of the surveys distributed 87 (35%) were returned. Eighty-two of the returned questionnaires were completed properly and were used in the analyses.

Procedure: The questionnaires were distributed by placing them in the mailboxes of all students who requested that their boxes remain open for the summer. Subjects were told in a cover letter that the questionnaire asked about the methods college students use to achieve high grades in college. They were assured that their answers would remain confidential. In order to protect subjects' anonymity, there was no identifying information on the questionnaire. Subjects were told that the questionnaires would be destroyed one

year following the completion of the data analysis. They were provided with an envelope and asked to return the survey to the experimenter via campus mail. They were asked to return the questionnaire even if they elected not to fill it out.

The questionnaire consisted of both Likert scale items, as well as open-ended questions. The first section of the questionnaire asked about demographic information. The second section consisted of bipolar scaled questions asking about the subject's knowledge of other people's participation in 15 behaviors (see Table 1).

Insert Table 1 about here.

The next section asked subjects to report how often he or she personally participated in the same 15 behaviors. The forth section asked the subjects to rate how dishonest each of the 15 behaviors was, also on a bipolar scale. The last section asked open-ended questions about the worst form of cheating the subject participated in and someone the subject knows participated in, as well as questions about whether or not these cheating behaviors resulted in better grades, and an open-ended question asking subjects why they think people cheat in college.

Results

Subjects: Ninety-eight percent of the subjects were between the ages of 18 and 22, and 99% will graduate between the years 1992 and 1994. The largest group is 20 years old (42%) and will graduate in 1992 (54%). There were many more female respondents (74% versus 26% male), but subjects were evenly distributed across major and normally across grade point average. When asked about their post-graduation plans, 51% of subjects said they planned on attending graduate school to earn either an MA or PhD. Fifteen percent plan to attend law school, 10% medical school, and 1% business school, making a total of 77% who plan to attend some kind of graduate school to earn an

advanced degree. Twelve percent will look for jobs, and 11% said they did not know what they will do after they graduate.

A repeated measures ANOVA was run on the data from the scaled questions using "who" (2 levels, you versus other) and each question (15) as the within subjects factors. A main effect for who, $F(1,79)=133.47$, $p<.001$ was found indicating that subjects reported more cheating on the part of people they knew than for themselves (see Figure 1).

T-tests were then performed on each of the you-other pairs. [Because of the large number of t-tests conducted, a stict p value (.001) was used to determine significance.] For example, the report of how frequently the subject heard about other people participating in copying answers during an exam was compared to how frequently the subject reported that he or she copied answers during an exam. Each of these comparisons resulted in significant differences ($p<.001$). Thus, for every individual behavior listed on the questionnaire, subjects reported significantly more cheating done by others than themselves (see Table 2).

Insert Table 2 about here.

The frequency with which subjects participated in each of the behaviors was noted and they were ranked from most common to least common. Differences in the frequency of these behaviors was examined. The most popular cheating behavior, working on individual assignments in groups ($M = 3.42$), was significantly more popular than all other forms of cheating ($p<.005$ for group vs. notes, $p<.001$ for group vs. all other cheating behaviors). Then next three types cheating in the rank ordering, using someone else's notes ($M = 2.83$), using someone else's old exams ($M = 2.51$), and making up a story to tell a professor to get more time to complete an assignment ($M = 2.35$) were done at similar rates, but were reported significantly more frequently than the other types

of cheating ($p < .001$ for all differences) (see Table 3).

Insert Table 3 about here.

Comparisons were also made between the levels of dishonesty of each of the 15 behaviors. Subjects evaluated those behaviors they participated in more often as less dishonest than those they did not. For example, working on individual assignments with other members of the class, the most popular type of cheating, was rated as significantly less dishonest than all other behaviors ($p < .001$) except for using someone's old exams which was seen as equally dishonest, and using someone else's notes which was rated significantly less dishonest than working in groups ($t = -7.11$, $p < .001$). The second most popular cheating behavior, using someone else's notes, was rated as significantly less dishonest than all other behaviors ($p < .001$) (see Table 4).

Insert Table 4 about here.

Subjects were asked, in an open-ended question, to report one incident of cheating that they had participated in, and one that someone they know took part in. Eighty-one percent of subjects were able to think of an incident they were involved in, but 99% of subjects were able to come up with a story about someone else's cheating. A t-test done on the square root transformation of their responses indicates that these percentages are significantly different, $t = 3.78$, $p < .001$, showing that subjects were able to recall an incident of someone else's cheating more easily than they could cite an event when they cheated personally (see Table 5).

Insert Table 5 about here.

Subjects were also asked if they thought that these cheating episodes resulted in better grades for either themselves or for the other person. One half of the subjects believed that they received a better grade in the course because they cheated, while 71% believed that their peers who cheated did better in the class than they would have if they had not cheated. The t-test showed these results to be significantly different, $t=2.78$, $p<.008$. Thus, subjects believed that other people's cheating was more beneficial to their grades than their cheating was to their own grades (see Table 6).

Insert Table 6 about here.

A MANOVA was conducted on the data to determine if those subjects who reported a cheating event in the open-ended question also reported more cheating on the 15 scaled questions. A main effect was found, $F(1,70)=7.00$, $p<.01$, showing that those who told of a cheating incident also reported significantly more cheating on the other behaviors.

Discussion

The results of the present investigation support other research which indicated that cheating is rife on college campuses. Subjects reported high incidence of cheating for both others (99%) as well as for themselves (81%). As predicted, they did report more cheating on the part of their classmates than for themselves. In addition, they seem to believe that the behaviors in which they participate are less dishonest than those they do not. Although the previously discussed motivators for cheating have been observed in the laboratory, they do not fully explain why subjects reported cheating or why cheating

appears to be so common. In order to participate in an activity we assume they would ordinarily label as bad (as was shown by their high dishonesty ratings of many of the cheating behaviors), students must find a way to rationalize their actions such that they convince themselves that what they are doing is acceptable. One such way is by comparing themselves to their peers and persuading themselves that their behavior is less bad than that of other people they know. This possibility, illustrated by social comparison theory (Suls & Wills, 1989), and specifically the theories of downward comparison and uniqueness bias, was supported by the data as subjects reported higher frequencies of cheating on the part of their classmates than they did for themselves.

The theory of downward comparison states that people will compare themselves to others who are worse off than they are in order to appear better themselves (Wills, 1991). Lateral comparison may also be used when rationalizing distasteful attributes, as it is seen as a way to reduce feelings of deviance. Thus, when people compare themselves to those who are just as bad or worse off than they are, they feel better about themselves.

The uniqueness bias is the inclination for people to underestimate the number of people who will act in socially desirable ways (Goethals, Messick, & Allison, 1991). This results in the tendency for people to believe that they themselves are uniquely good, or at least no worse than anyone else. People are able to convince themselves that they are better than average (Myers & Ridl, 1979) in a number of domains including goodness (Allison, Messick, & Goethals, 1989).

These theories of social comparison help explain how students who believe that cheating is wrong, are nevertheless able to engage in cheating behaviors. If they believe that everyone else cheats more than they do, they are able to excuse their own occasional misbehavior. When asked to discuss their own cheating behavior, students are able to come up with a peer group with whom to compare themselves via constructive social comparison. This is defined as "social comparison 'in the head,' with little regard for

actual social reality, and is comprised of a number of processes, including the manufacturing of self-serving consensus estimates" (Goethals, Messick, & Allison, 1991). Because people tend to believe that they are uniquely good, subjects were able to convince themselves that they are better than average (Myers & Ridl, 1979). By choosing to compare themselves to "cheaters", subjects convinced themselves that they were better than their peers. Students are able to view their cheating behavior as not at all unusual, and they see it as a reflection of situational forces acting upon them.

Subjects' answers on open-ended questions about why people cheat confirmed this possible explanation. One student said that cheating occurs because it is the "accepted norm today" and that "students rationalize [by telling themselves that] everyone else is [doing it]". Another subject said that "if cheating was the way in high school, why should they stop now?". It is clear that these subjects felt that cheating is normative. Because everyone else does it, their own dishonest behavior is justified. Perhaps students feel that if they do not cheat, they put themselves at a disadvantage because they believe that everyone else is taking whatever measures necessary to achieve high grades.

Subjects also believed that others benefitted more from cheating than they themselves did. Because social comparison helps to make them think they are "better" than others, they are able to attribute their good grades to their own honest efforts, not their cheating, while they believe others are dependent on cheating for high grades. They believe they would have received the same grade without cheating which allows subjects to justify their dishonest behavior. They convinced themselves that, although they participated in a dishonest activity, the consequences were no different than if they had acted in a completely honest way, Thus, they see their cheating behaviors merely as "insurance" against a possible hazard.

Contributing to cheating justification is the fact that those behaviors subjects participated in most were classified as less dishonest than those they abstain from. Thus,

they excuse themselves from this dishonest behavior by deciding that it is not dishonest, and in some circumstances, these behaviors are seen as perfectly warranted.

For example, many students felt that "having and unfair advantage [such as having access to an exam others do not have] was dishonest", but "provided all work you turn in is your own and it fulfills the assignment", forms of cheating like crib notes, bringing completed blue books to exams, or turning in a paper to more than one class was alright. As long as you did the work to make the crib sheet or answer the essay questions in the blue book, these behaviors were excused. Copying another students work, however, was unacceptable to most subjects because it involved "stealing" another student's work or ideas.

Students also blame their parents and teachers for widespread cheating. "Pressure" to do well and get into graduate and professional school was often used as an excuse. One student said that students cheat in college because "the Reagan-Bush 'achievement ethic' throws honesty and integrity out the window in favor of personal gain".

Some subjects exhibited outright hostility toward their professors when asked about why people cheat. One subject said that "professors have the tendency to believe that their class is the only one you have and obviously there is a lot more to college than this". Another student justified using old exams to study from by saying that "if a teacher is lazy enough to keep his/her class exactly the same from year to year, then she/he deserves to have students [cheat]". Yet another student believes that people cheat because of both the "pressure to get good grades" as well as the "challenge to fool professors".

It appears as if cheating is widespread, in part, because it is an acceptable practice among college undergraduates. Almost all report participating in deceptive academic practices at some point in their college careers, and virtually all of them know at least one classmate who has cheated in at least one course. In order to curb the drastic number of cheating incidents, we must find a way to make cheating unacceptable on the part of those

who participate in such behavior. As long as cheating is the norm and undergraduates believe that it is justified, we cannot hope to foster environments of academic integrity.

Although this study helps to further our understanding of cheating on college campuses, there were a few problems with the research the most worrisome of which was the low response rate. Only about 35% of the students contacted returned completed surveys. Perhaps there is something different about those who chose to respond to the survey. However, our technique for distributing the questionnaires might be at fault. It is possible that, despite the fact that they left their mailboxes open during the summer, some of the students may not have been checking their mail at regular intervals, and thus may not have received the survey in time to complete and return it to the experimenters. Because the data are consistent with past findings, it is hoped that the present findings are reliable in spite of the low response rate.

Another problem with the research is with the explanation of the results. There is a chicken and egg sort of difficulty that is not interpretable with the present data. This obstacle is with our inability to separate the justification from the cause. In other words, the experimenters cannot know if students cheat because they believe everyone else does, or if they say that others cheat in order to justify their own cheating behavior. Further investigation will have to be done to examine these possibilities.

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Table 1

Cheating Behaviors

Getting notes from people who have previously taken the course.

Getting exams from people who have previously taken the course.

Getting papers from people who have previously taken the course.

Turning a paper that someone else who took the class in a previous year wrote.

Purchasing a paper someone else wrote and turning it in.

Making up a story to tell a professor in order to get more time to complete the assignment.

Bringing cheat sheets to an exam.

Copying answers from another student while taking an exam.

Stealing an exam.

Studying from an exam someone else stole.

Working on individual assignments with classmates.

Saying a paper/test was turned in when it wasn't.

Bringing completed blue books to a test.

Having a friend sign your name on an attendance sheet when you didn't actually attend class.

Handing in the same paper for two classes.

Table 2

Behavior	Mean-You	Mean-Other	p
Working in groups	3.42	5.16	.001
Notes	2.81	4.78	.001
Exams	2.51	4.66	.001
Making up stories	2.35	5.33	.001
Paper	1.67	4.01	.001
Sign in	1.60	3.08	.001
Same paper	1.57	3.66	.001
Copy during test	1.40	2.98	.001
Crib notes	1.40	3.10	.001
Lie paper	1.19	2.31	.001
Blue book	1.15	2.26	.001
Use stolen test	1.12	1.49	.001
Use other's paper	1.06	2.54	.001
Buy paper	1.00	1.61	.001
Steal exam	1.00	1.29	.001

Table 3

Frequency of Self-Reported Behaviors
(from most to least frequent, 1=never, 7=frequently)

Behavior	Mean
Working in groups	3.42
Notes	2.81
Exams	2.51
Making up stories	2.35
Paper	1.67
Sign in	1.60
Same paper	1.57
Copy during test	1.40
Crib notes	1.40
Lie paper	1.19
Blue book	1.15
Use stolen test	1.12
Use other's paper	1.06
Buy paper	1.00
Steal exam	1.00

Table 4

Level of Dishonesty
(from least to most dishonest,
1=not at all dishonest, 7=completely dishonest)

Behavior	Mean
Notes	1.81
Working in groups	3.12
Exams	3.17
Paper	3.63
Same paper	3.74
Making up stories	4.73
Sign in	4.98
Use stolen test	6.22
Lie paper	6.35
Blue book	6.55
Crib notes	6.63
Use other's paper	6.71
Copy during test	6.72
Buy paper	6.80
Steal exam	6.94

Table 5

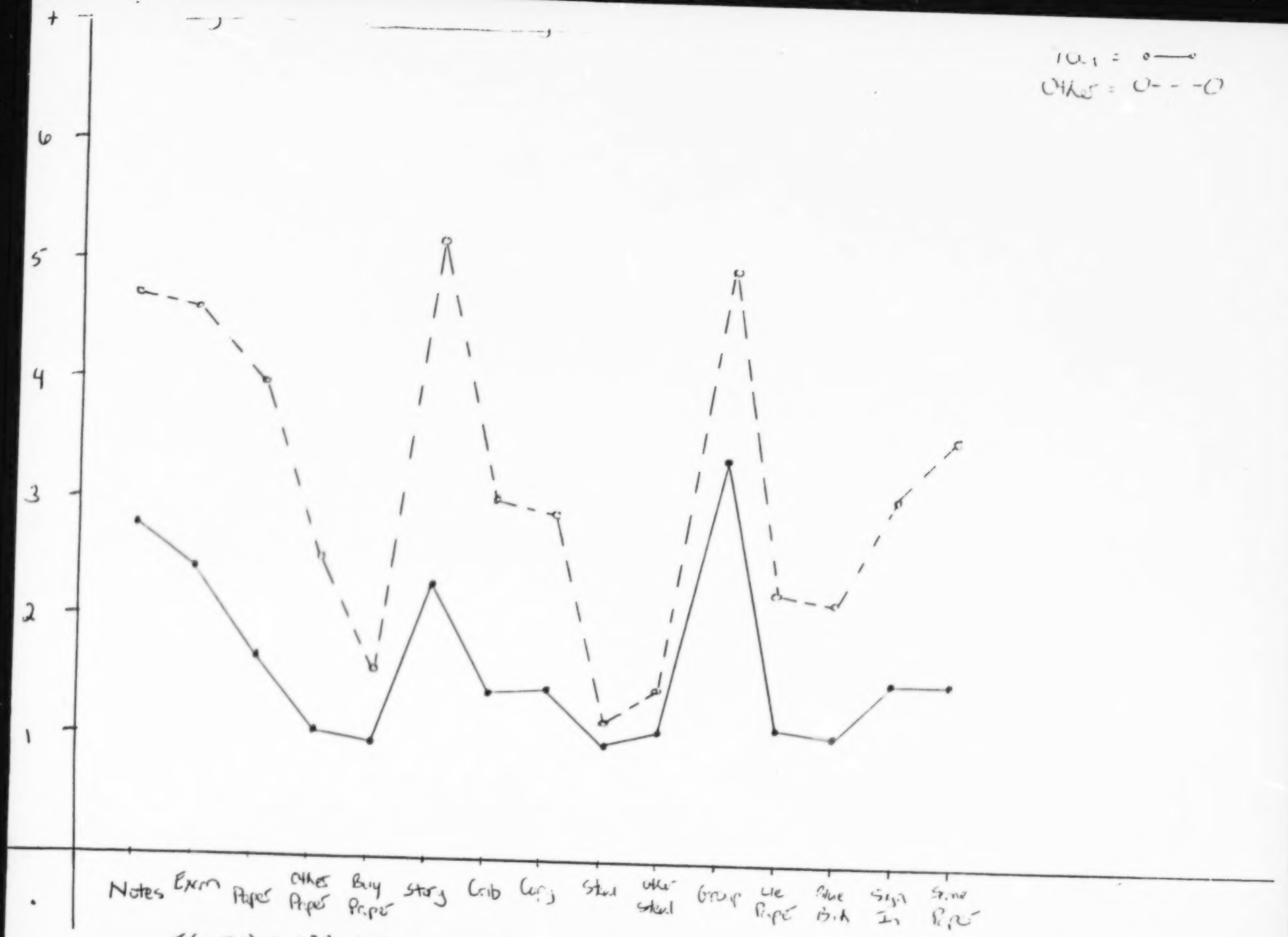
Subject cites incident of self cheating	Subject cites incident of other cheating
81%	99%

$t=3.78$, $p<.001$

Table 6

Subject reported cheating helped own grade	Subject reported cheating helped other's grade
50%	71%

$t=2.78$, $p<.01$



$F(1,79) = 133.47$, $p < .001$